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AUTHOR Becker, Samuel L.
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ABSTRACT

Too often, academic mentoring of young faculty is seen as an individual responsibility; further, advice and help are believed to flow in only one direction--from the older to the younger faculty member. In many institutions, each junior faculty member is paired with a senior faculty member, but this type of arrangement is often fraught with resentment and personality conflict. Even when the one-on-one mentoring arrangement works, its benefits are limited because conceptually it fails to recognize the critical role of the community. Studies of communication show that the lessons from a single faculty member have little influence if they are not reinforced by the total community. In the ideal department everyone would have equal mentoring responsibilities. However, there are a number of impediments to such an ideal situation: (1) individuals are forced to compete for limited merit pay funds; (2) the tenure system and the current climate of litigation makes older faculty afraid to befriend junior faculty who might not receive tenure; (3) factions within departments threaten one another; (4) academic culture associates negativity with helping; it equates nitpicking and harshness with high standards. This is unfortunate since scholars in communication know that research suggests that he or she who helps others most is most helped; he or she who gives out information most receives most back. A narrative about a faltering monastery illustrates the point that everyone benefits when everyone helps everyone; a community of sharing and caring survives and prospers. (TB)

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THE DEPARTMENT AS MENTOR

Samuel L. Becker
Keynote for Mentoring in the Academy Conference
Southern States Communication Association
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One of the positive developments in the academy in the past decade or two, due in good part to the consciousness-raising brought about by the feminist movement, has been our heightened awareness of the importance of mentoring young faculty members.

Mentoring, of course, is nothing new, but its occurrence in the past was too often haphazard or, at worst, a matter of favoritism. Usually, it depended on a senior faculty member taking a liking to a junior faculty member, thus counseling him often and smoothing his path to advancement. I use the male pronoun here advisedly, for that senior faculty member was generally a WASP male who saw in the young WASP male faculty member a reflection of himself. Although not done with evil intent, or even consciousness, other categories of faculty members were systematically excluded from the opportunity to be mentored.

We have made an important step forward by recognizing all of this and by attempting to make the advantages of mentorship available to all young faculty. I would suggest, though, that we may be going about this task of mentoring in the wrong way.

Too often, we perceive mentoring only as an individual responsibility and we see the advice and help flowing only in one direction. In many institutions, each junior faculty member is

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being paired with a senior faculty member and the latter is told to mentor the former.

Although this arrangement sometimes works, too often, the relationship between the mentor and the mentored is unnatural and awkward. Junior faculty members feel they are being forced back into the role of student, a role they thought they had finally shed when they completed graduate school. Senior faculty members feel uncomfortable about intruding on their colleagues' space and, often, are not sure they have anything helpful to pass on.

Even when the one-on-one mentoring arrangement seems to be working, I would argue that the benefits it can produce are limited because the theory on which it is based is conceptually flawed. It is built on a model of individualism that has been taken to its extreme in our colleges and universities, as in our society; it fails to recognize the critical role of the community. As Amitai Etzioni, one of the fathers of the communitarian movement, has said:

> Communities are not merely environments to which an actor adjusts as he or she would to a new climate, but they also influence to a great extent the person's most inner desires, preferences and moral commitments. This is not to suggest that there is no free will or choice but to recognize that individuality is honed out of social, collective (communal) backgrounds. (Etzioni, 1991, p. 125)

We need a system of mentoring that recognizes and takes advantage of this power of the community; that is, a system of

mentoring based on a community model--the department as community--the department as mentor, and department strength as the goal.

As we know from many studies of communication, the lessons from a single faculty mentor will have little influence if they are not reinforced by the total community or, worse, if they are not consistent with what one senses from all of the other members of the community. More important, no one faculty member, however experienced, has the resources for as rich mentoring as all of the faculty together can provide. And most important, the reliance on senior-junior faculty pairings for our mentoring virtually eliminates the opportunities for mentoring to flow in all directions. These are the reasons we need the department--or community--as mentor, with everyone sharing in the responsibility of mentoring others and everyone sharing in the benefits of being mentored.

I realize that "responsibility" is not a concept often mentioned in the contemporary academy. It has been shoved aside by the ever-expanding concept of academic freedom. Academic freedom is tremendously important, of course, but it, like other freedoms, must be brought back into balance with responsibility if it is to survive.

In the ideal department toward which I believe we must move, everyone--from the most junior to the most senior faculty member--has equal mentoring responsibilities. Everyone has something unique from which others can benefit. What is needed for that

benefit to be realized is an atmosphere of sharing and of caring, of concern for the community as a whole.

A key assumption underlying most present-day, individual-based mentoring schemes is that only the young need mentoring. That assumption is obviously fallacious. Since our field, like most fields, is changing rapidly, the newly-minted Ph.D. often has new ideas and information to give that are useful to those long out of graduate school. I could even mount an argument that, in many departments, it is the oldest faculty members who are most in need of mentoring so that the field does not pass them by, to help them continue to play useful roles in their departments.

Even department chairs could use some mentoring from their faculty colleagues. Instead of complaining about the kind of job our department chairs are doing, we need to help them do a better job, just as we expect those chairs to help us do better jobs. Although novice faculty members are probably unaware of it, many of them have useful ideas for the better administration and strengthening of their departments. They can only come forward with these ideas, though, if an open, non-threatening atmosphere is created in the department, if the message is constantly communicated that all of us need help, all of us welcome help.

I do not know how many of you have asked younger faculty members to read and provide feedback on papers you have written or on one of your course syllabi. If you have not done so, you ought to try it. I have received extremely insightful and

helpful comments from some of the Assistant Professors in our department when I have asked them to read drafts of things I have written. Even the present paper had some of this help. I hope they have benefitted as much when I have read and commented on their papers, syllabi, and applications for research grants or leaves.

I also give all of my colleagues materials that I run across that might be useful for their courses or scholarly work, and they have reciprocated with help on new statistical tools or other materials I could use.

All of that is good, but it is not enough for a productive departmental community. In addition to providing information, criticism, and other forms of help, members of the community need to respect and value each other's work, as well as each other's differences, and we need to do so in observable ways. It is only in such an environment that help can be effectively given and received.

At this point, some of you are probably saying, "All of that is well and good, but how do we get to that utopian state--especially with some of the incompetent, unpleasant, trouble-making s.o.b.s in my department?" That, of course, is a very good question, and I will not pretend it is easy to answer. There is probably nothing that is "more fragile, more elusive in the modern (or postmodern) world than real community" (Buehrens, 1994, p. 2).

There are a great many impediments to the achievement of a mentoring departmental community. One such impediment is the structure and reinforcement pattern of most contemporary colleges and universities. They do not encourage a sense of community, especially in times of financial exigency. Individuals are forced to compete for limited merit pay funds, sometimes even for travel money and research leaves, just as departments are forced to compete for equipment and operating funds, sometimes even for survival as institutions look for units to eliminate in order to save money. Our structure forces us into a win-lose game, rather than a win-win one.

Another structural factor inhibiting the development of the type of departmental community I have been describing is our tenure system, especially when combined as it presently is with our society's litigiousness. The senior faculty of many departments fear that constant encouragement or positive reinforcement of a young faculty member can lead to a lawsuit if that young faculty member fails to receive tenure. As a result, not only do they hesitate to provide praise, they make certain that the probationary faculty member receives enough negative feedback, with copies on file, so that there is ample evidence of prior warning, just in case the tenure decision is negative and the individual involved files a grievance.

Yet another structural factor inhibiting a community's development is the great prominence we tend to give to department areas--to interpersonal and group communication vs rhetorical

studies, cultural studies vs mass communication, or within mass communication, film vs broadcasting, or production vs history and criticism. And as we permit our departments to fracture into smaller and smaller elements, we begin to brood about our differences. We worry that "our" area of the department is hurt when resources go to any of the other areas instead of to ours.

A non-structural factor impeding the development of community is our confusion of negativity with helping. We equate nit-picking and harshness with high standards. The more we tear down the intellectual work of someone else, the more wisdom and sophistication we think we are exhibiting. This disease has infected not only our departments, but our journals. Under the hood of anonymity, we slash out and build our egos by snidely tearing down the efforts of others. (For a fine elaboration of this point, you ought to read the article by Blair, Brown, and my colleague Leslie Baxter in the June 1994 issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, if you have not already done so.)

Just as editors and associate editors of our journals need to start thinking of themselves as mentors--encouraging, motivating, and helping the scholars of our field to develop to their fullest--so we, in our individual departments, must do the same. None of these impediments to community will be easy to overcome, but clearly they can be. In fact, they have been in some instances. We need to study those and contrary instances, seeking to understand why some faculties are cohesive, the members mutually supportive, while others are rent with schisms,

the members competitive, even mutually destructive. This seems to me a tremendously important topic for some of our scholars of rhetorical, organizational, group, and interpersonal communication to attack. It could make a great contribution not only to communication theory, but to the good workings of the academy if the findings provide guidance on this important matter.

A start in this research may be the finding of some of the early studies on information flow. As most of you probably recall, when scholars studied the individuals who tended to receive the most information from other people, they turned out to be those individuals who gave more information to others. This phenomenon is probably related to that observed in group studies of who members of a group direct the most comments to. Again, the finding is that those who direct more comments to others tend to get more comments directed at them. All of this, of course, supports the biblical adage to "cast thy bread upon the waters."

Perhaps most important of all, we must find ways to build coherence out of difference. To be a strong community, a community that adequately mentors all of its members, we need to value our differences--whether differences of sex, ethnicity, and religion, or differences of theoretical orientation, scholarly method, and teaching area. We must not only respect each other, but learn to understand and appreciate the ways our differences strengthen the totality that is the community and, hence, the

ways they strengthen each of us. When we respect our differences, we will be less hesitant to seek help from each other and to offer help to each other. We will be more open to the mentoring of the community.

To do these things, to bring about the kind of supportive, mentoring department I have been talking about, will require the efforts of every member of the department. A good department, in this sense, is like a good marriage. Neither can come about, or be maintained, unless those involved work at it constantly and conscientiously.

An idea of the kind of work required, and the state of mind that can help motivate that work, is suggested by an ancient Hasidic tale titled "The Rabbi's Gift." This story seems to me a fitting end to these remarks, and a fitting beginning for our conference on "Mentoring in the Academy." Let me read it to you.

The Rabbi's Gift

Once, long ago, there was a monastery verging on collapse. The buildings were falling down, the gardens had grown up in weeds, the animals had died or wandered away, and there were only a few monks left in the place.

This was all very sad because at one time this monastery had been alive and vigorous with many monks who did lots of good deeds. The monastery was especially important to the people of the area because of the hope it gave them. No matter how hard times got for the people, the monks would cheer them up by

promising that sooner or later a Messiah--a great spiritual leader--would come and help straighten things out.

But the Messiah did not come. As a matter of fact, instead of getting better, things got worse. The ruler of the land was cruel, food became scarce, and the people were very discouraged. Matters were as difficult in the monastery as they were among the people. Finally there were only five monks left, including the abbot.

In the woods near the monastery there was a little hut that the rabbi in the village occasionally used as a retreat. One day, as the monks were talking about the hard times that had come to their monastery and wondering what to do, it occurred to the abbot that perhaps the rabbi might have some helpful advice. So the next time the rabbi was at his retreat the abbot took up his walking staff and went to visit him.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot warmly. But when the abbot told him the sad story of how bad things had gotten at the monastery, the rabbi could only nod in agreement. "Yes, I know," he said, "the times are bad everywhere, and the people are desperate. Everyone seems hopeless. Even the synagogue is nearly empty on the sabbath."

At that the abbot and the rabbi began to weep together. Then they read from the Torah and spoke quietly of deep matters, trying to comfort each other. The time came for the abbot to return to the monastery, and the two embraced at the door. As he was about to walk away, the abbot turned and spoke. "It has been

very good to be here with you. But I have failed in my expectation that you would have some words of wisdom. Is there nothing you can tell me to save the monastery--no advice?"

"No, I am sorry," answered the rabbi, "I have no words of wisdom. The only thing I can say is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, the other monks rushed up to discover what he had learned from the rabbi. But the abbot shook his head. "He couldn't help," said the abbot. "All we did was weep together and read the Torah. The only thing he said--and I don't understand what he meant--was that the Messiah is one of us."

In the days that followed, the monks thought about that strange statement and wondered about it. How could it be possible that the Messiah is one of us? We are the sorriest of creatures.

Could the rabbi have meant that the abbot is a great leader and just doesn't know it? He has been our leader for a very long time.... On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Timothy. After all, Brother Timothy is a man of great spiritual insight.... Surely, he didn't mean Brother Thomas. He's simply too quiet, even though he is the one who's there when you need him.... And it can't be Brother Joseph. He's too grumpy, although he is usually right.... That leaves only me. And I know I'm not the Messiah. After all, I'm just an ordinary fellow, with no special talents.

But, suppose he did mean me? Suppose I am the Messiah. Oh, my goodness, I hope not. I don't have what it takes.

All of the monks continued to think about the matter. And as they did, they began treating each other differently--as though one of them might be the Messiah, deserving of great respect and assistance. And as they treated each other like they might be the Messiah, they began to feel better about themselves.

Then one day some of the villagers went to the monastery to pray in the chapel. They were surprised about how different the place felt. They noticed, too, that the monks seemed to have a special regard for one another. The monastery had once again become a very spiritual place to be. So they went back to the village and told their neighbors.

Soon the villagers were coming to the monastery to help repair the buildings and to tend the garden, and one of them brought a goat, and another a couple of chickens. One of the villagers even asked if he might join the monastery. Then another, and another.

Before long, the monastery was thriving. It became a center of hope and spiritual vitality. And it was not long before this goodwill and optimism had spread out to include the village. Even the rabbi was happier as his people began coming to the synagogue on the sabbath. It never occurred to him that the gift of respect and hope he had given the abbot had returned to include him, too.

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